
Section 1

The Mentor's Role

LEARNING-FOCUSED mentoring relationships make a significant emotional and intellectual difference in the induction experience for new teachers, as well as in their continuing professional practice. These clearly structured entries into the profession frame the learning journey from novice to expert teaching. Beginning teachers benefiting from skilled mentoring are more likely to:

- Increase their efficacy as instructional problem-solvers and decision-makers
- Engage in collaborative professional exchanges regarding improving practice
- Remain in the teaching profession

First and Foremost

For beginning teachers, the benefits of a mentoring experience include:

- *Increased efficacy as problem-solvers and decision-makers*
- *Higher engagement in collaborative exchanges*
- *Increased likelihood of remaining in teaching*

Who we are as mentors, how we mentor and what we mentor about are essential to meeting the current needs of beginning teachers. A central component in a learning-focused mentoring program is a clear understanding of the respective role and responsibilities of each participant. Framing a mentoring identity as one who builds capacity in others is a necessary first step. The most important function for mentors is to embrace a growth orientation, understanding that the work is to increase their colleague's effectiveness as professional problem-solvers and decision-makers.

This process begins with establishing and maintaining a learning focus within the relationship. In this way, each party shapes and understands the nature and expectations of the mentoring interactions. We build on the work of Laurent Daloz (1998), suggesting that a mentor's role within such a relationship is to balance three functions:

- Offering support
- Creating challenge
- Facilitating a professional vision

These functions can operate independently in specific situations, but in the greater context of the relationship they must be connected. Balancing these three elements energizes growth and learning. Support alone will provide comfort but may encourage complacency. Challenge without support may increase anxiety and fear of failure. Support and challenge without vision may leave us wandering on a journey looking only at the ground beneath us but not the road ahead.

Offering Support

Support for the new teacher occurs in four distinct categories: emotional, physical, instructional and institutional. Sometimes the novice needs a shoulder to cry on, a hug rewarding an especially exhilarating success and every range of emotional support in between. Often, the support is physical—perhaps tackling the room arrangement, moving desks and setting up learning centers, or creating a special bulletin board or wall display, or even carting books for a thematic unit from the local library. Institutional support includes guidelines for applying procedures and policies, or expert advice on certain processes. On the other hand, instructional support includes content area resources and practical professional suggestions based on current research and years of rich experience.

In a learning-focused relationship, mentors offer support by:

- Attending fully—respectfully listening when our partner needs to share concerns, frustrations, experiences and new ideas.
- Responding empathetically—acknowledging feelings and perhaps a sharing of concerns, frustrations and experiences.
- Creating a 'safe' space—attending to the verbal and nonverbal communications that establish rapport and support thinking.
- Reviewing schedules—coordinating pockets of time that may be devoted to addressing pressing personal or professional concerns.
- Offering resources—providing time, energy and materials to ease the difficult challenges beginners often face.
- Providing information—about the practices and policies of the school and district to facilitate the protégé's induction into the professional community; and about the craft of teaching to support the development of sound educational practice.

Support

- Emotional
- Physical
- Instructional
- Institutional

Instructional Support includes:

- Time management tips
- Instructional strategies
- Student assessment strategies
- Ideas for establishing management routines
- Curriculum design
- Lesson planning

Institutional Support includes:

- Staff evaluation procedures
- Resource acquisition procedures
- Expectations regarding before and after school monitoring duties
- Current local initiatives
- Leave or attendance policies

Creating Challenge

Challenge

- Goal-driven
- Data-focused
- Thought-provoking

In our experience, mentors devote most of their time to providing support, such as that described in the previous section. However, unless support is balanced with challenge, we rob new teachers of the opportunity to grow and learn. If our goal is to nurture independent, effective practitioners, then it is critical that novices take responsibility for their own practice.

Growth requires that beginners develop the capacity to apply and adapt expert information within the context of their own classrooms. This development includes making meaning of new information and experiences. This learning enables new teachers to apply, refine and create alternative strategies based on students' needs, curricular readiness and teacher values.

Skillful mentors balance the supportive aspects of the relationship with challenges that promote continual attention to improvement in practice. In a learning-focused relationship, challenge is created by:

- Structuring rigorous examination and analysis of practice by applying Planning and Reflecting Templates (see Section Three, Maximizing Time and Attention).
- Engaging in goal-setting, and continuing to have goal-driven conversations.
- Maintaining a focus on student learning, including assistance in analyzing student performance information and determining cause-effect relationships.
- Exploring samples of student work, considering the protégé's decisions and experiences and discussing both positive and negative results of instructional practice.
- Actively engaging protégés in problem-solving and decision-making by forming problem-solving partnerships, brainstorming options and generating solutions.
- Assisting in the identification and articulation of criteria for choices and consequences with think alouds and coaching sessions.
- Building connections between current theory and classroom practice.
- Constructing and conducting action research projects, building norms of experimentation and reflective practice.

Facilitating Professional Vision

For beginning teachers, it is often difficult to project past the most immediate experience. There are no reference points to use in envisioning student growth. There are no memories to surface to help see the year unfold. The day-to-day operation of a classroom is generally new territory for the novice, so it is often necessary to illuminate the learning pathways.

Facilitating a professional vision creates a lifelong learner engaged in continuous improvement. It creates a picture of sound educational practice and high expectations. It suggests that a teacher is also a learner and reminds us that we don't learn to teach; rather we learn from our teaching. Facilitating vision is cumulative and developmental.

In a learning-focused relationship, facilitating a professional vision is achieved by:

- Setting high, yet achievable, expectations for the novice teacher, considering sources such as the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Beginning Teacher Standards (see Appendix) or local standards that define what effective teachers should know and be able to do.
- Assisting in the identification of learning outcomes for students that are broader than one lesson or unit.
- Painting the bigger picture of content integration; connecting subject areas with real world applications.
- Developing action plans, prioritizing tasks and identifying resources for achieving goals.
- Encouraging collaborative opportunities with the mentor, other novices, and within the faculty (e.g., committee work, interdisciplinary projects, grade or department level planning).
- Modeling a professional identity that exemplifies the best we know how to be.

Again, our continual attention to balancing support with challenge, with a vision that embodies the values of high expectations and lifelong learning, develops a colleague who can exceed the rigorous standards and meet the difficult demands of professional life.

*We don't learn to teach;
We learn from our teaching.*

Facilitating vision

- High expectations for self and students
- Lifelong learning
- Professional identity